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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic pedagogy builds a bridge between nontraditional students' home community with the values of the academic community, but the point of "bridging" the two communities seems to be for the student to come over to "our side." This paper proposes an ethnographic pedagogical approach that is reciprocal, bridging both directions, becoming a call for teachers, not just the students, to learn about and change the position of alternative discourses in the institution. The paper discusses what is meant by alternative discourses. It then turns the notion of alternative discourses back into teaching and the institution, to consider how alternative discourses should inform the teaching of standardized written English. The paper focuses on a basic writing classroom where students were asked to practice ethnographic research on their own cultural community; more specifically, students were asked to research what the author/educator called at that time a "speech community." It explains that the class at California State University Fresno was made up of 17 students; 13 of these students identified themselves as having Mexican origins while 4 students identified themselves as being of other mixed origin. The paper addresses questions of how classroom learning can translate into better scholarly conditions for students. (NKA)

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Navigating Alternative Discourses in the Basic Writing Classroom: Ethnography as Agent for Change.

by Virginia Crisco

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Navigating Alternative Discourses in the Basic Writing Classroom:
Ethnography as Agent for Change

"Ethnic Identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language."
- Gloria Anzaldua, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue"

Ethnographic pedagogy, as discussed by Shirley Brice Heath, and Eleanor Kutz, Suzie Groden, and Vivian Zamel, builds a bridge between nontraditional students' home community with the values of the academic community. Unfortunately, the assumption these teachers and writers make is that the bridge only goes one way, that the point of "bridging" the two communities is for the student to come over to "our side." I propose an ethnographic pedagogical approach that is reciprocal, bridging both directions, becoming a call for teachers, not just the students, to learn about and change the position of alternative discourses in the institution.

But first, let me briefly discuss what I mean by alternative discourses. At the 2001 CCCCs in Denver, Patricia Bizzell, Peter Elbow, and Jacquelyn Jones Royster gave presentations in a session titled "The Future of College Composition: Impacts of Alternative Discourses on Standard English." This session focused on the changing nature of the field's understanding of the possibilities of writing and communicating through alternative discourses. All presenters in this session viewed discourse, academic and otherwise, as multiple, varied, and changing as well as being connected to community knowledge and values. These discourses become "alternative" when they are not supported in more formal academic communications. In my case, *standardized* written English is the expected discourse to be taught in the basic writing classroom. In addition, I want to emphasize Jacquelyn Royster's point that talking about alternative discourses is really talking about "alternative *assumptions* about discourses." So in this reflexive moment, I would like to turn the notion of alternative discourses back onto

teaching and the institution, to consider how alternative discourses should inform the teaching of standardized written English.

My discussion focuses on a basic writing classroom where students were asked to practice ethnographic research on their own cultural community. More specifically, students were asked to research what I called at that time a "speech community." Through this research, students not only provided information about their cultural background, they also let their readers, other teachers, and students, know where they stood in relation to that knowledge. But first, let me discuss the cultural make up of the class. California State University, Fresno is a culturally diverse institution. This particular class was made up of 17 students. Of those 17 students, 13 identified themselves as having Mexican origins while 4 students identified themselves as having Filipino (1), Black (2), and white (1) cultures / races. In relation to languages spoken, 3 students were born in the United States and spoke English as their native language; 4 students were born in the United States and spoke Spanish as their native language and English as a second language; 7 students were born in Mexico and moved to the United States around high school (they had been learning and practicing English for 6 years or less), and 2 students were born in their native countries, in this case Mexico and the Philippines, and moved to the United States when they were very young. Though the class seemed homogenous in that the majority of students identified themselves as Mexican Americans, in actuality, there was much diversity in their experiences and thinking toward language. For our purposes here, I will focus on the students who were born in the United States, spoke Spanish as their first language, and learned English in school. These students have had experience in the education system, have learned and used both languages regularly, and had definite opinions about educational policy. In addition, these students provided me with the impetus to take

responsibility for the cultural information and attitudes I asked students to bring into the classroom.

In this example of classroom learning, ethnography provided my students and I with a way to discuss each person's culture in relation to language and writing. Most interesting in the students' ethnographic research was an emphasis the variety of languages they spoke and their complicated relationships to these languages. Many students spoke about three distinct language communities involving English, Spanish and Spanglish. Spanglish, according to Jose, is a language created by the Chicano culture mixing English and Spanish words. Jose observes in his ethnographic essay titled "Spanglish" that this language is not valued by the English or the Spanish speaking cultures, as it is a mixture of both languages and not a pure form. He then suggests that some people want Spanglish to be eliminated as a communication style and goes on to write, "stripping one completely of their communication style is like taking their culture away too [. . .] in many cases this is the only piece of Mexican culture the Chicano people have." Stripping culture through the loss of language was a common theme for these ethnographic essays. More specifically, students felt that they had to *choose* between cultures, and that the various language communities they belonged to defined them, restricted them, and asked them make rhetorical choices. Yasmin writes, "These three speech communities have demonstrated who I am as a person. They separate me into different speech communities [. . .] I use each community to communicate in a way that they understand me and accept me for who I am [. . .] I feel that these three communities split me into three categories, but unite me in each one of the communities I have mentioned." In addition, this cultural tension was played out in the home and in the school where students were expected, in the school, on the one hand, to speak the English language and were told, at times by teachers and other students, to "go back to Mexico if you

can't speak English." On the other hand, at home, children are expected to speak the language of the family. Beatrice, speculating about why her parents never learned English, writes, "Maybe part of the reason for not doing so was because they thought that by learning a language other than their own they felt like they would be putting their culture and beliefs aside, that maybe if they did learn a different language they would become Americanized, and they didn't want that [. . .] That is why my parents have always asked us to speak Spanish in front of them." The themes that students discuss are reminiscent of issues brought up in Gloria Anzaldua's book *Borderlands / La Frontera*. Anzaldua's answer, to the Chicano, is to embrace the mestiza consciousness, the ambiguity that comes from being a part of two (or more) cultures. But as a white teacher, I wonder, how do I become a border crosser; how am I responsible for the struggle for student equality through ethnic identity and language?

To start, taking responsibility in the struggle for equality begins with educating myself about what it is like to live the mestiza consciousness. This can be accomplished, I argue, through teachers' commitment to what ethnographic research, either their students' or their own, can teach. As Suresh Canagarajah in *Resisting Linguistic Imperialsim in English Teaching* suggests, ethnographic teacher-research provides teachers with 1) an introduction to students' vernacular; 2) the ability to see one's own culture through students' eyes, and to therefore locate and examine the teacher's or the students' own position within the hegemony; and 3) the ability to become a border crosser with students, to confront and negotiate the various discourses and ideologies that a person faces in a multicultural social structure. What Canagarajah has articulated is an approach for teachers to critically examine how they construct the classroom, pedagogically and socially, and, as well, demonstrates how teachers can synthesize the knowledge students provide about their culture with their own pedagogy, toward better

classroom and learning situations for both teachers and students. What I am most interested in, though, is how that learning can translate into better scholarly conditions for students, to, in line with advice from Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner, show explicitly how exposure to students' experiences intervene and inform pedagogical practices as well as, I would add, institutional practices.

So I end this presentation not with answers but with questions: what do we do with the challenges students bring to the classroom that focus on their experiences with language and identity through their ethnographic research and writing? One of my most significant observation about bringing culture into the classroom is that this knowledge does not come wrapped in a tidy package; students don't just talk about the great food or rituals of their culture; they also bring with them attitudes, assumptions, and accusations that may conflict directly with the institutional values I represent, the standardized written English I am expected to teach. As a teacher, then, how do I respond or act, when Jose, for example, says "The English only proposition for the government, or whoever supports it, wants to take our culture away", or when Beatrice says "the only way to learn English is to practice as much as you can, although no one should deny you the right to speak your language," or when Yasmin says, "Our professors say that we need to practice more our English [. . .] I guess the professor feels that he's being isolated from this community and wants us to speak in the community he understands: English." These students all speak with anger about being forced to ignore the discourses they are proud of, to speak the language of the academy only. In the end, student ethnography can become a change agent in the institution, provide useful knowledge to teachers and students, and support critical reflection on teaching, learning, and institutional spaces; but at what point should change happen and where should the movement for change come from? When we ask our students to be

collaborators, coresearchers, if you will, what responsibility do we have to act on the linguistic inequities that these students' research projects bring into the classroom?

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CS 511 148

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